

# Half Empty

Again and again. Watching critically, the clock fills the room with second-to-second chatter—the arms on the clock cross over themselves as they strike twelve.

Derrick rustles through his over-the-shoulder bag; however, a tickling in his throat beckons for a cough or two. In a frantic search, he looks for the resume that he had made a home for in his satchel's inside pocket. His eyes are fixed on the bottomless abyss of his bag, scrambling for his ticket to paradise.

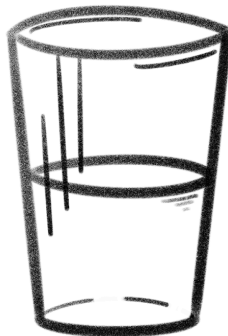
A voice rumbles from behind the desk, “Don’t bother, I already got it.” The resume obstructs his face. The man sits back in his seat with his black suit with pencil-thin white pinstripe laid across the coat, which sits open. While the man reads, he realigns his black tie with the buttons on his collared

white shirt. He continues, “At least you were on time.”

Clasping his wrist, Derrick rubs his thumb on his left palm. “I-I was in a hurry,” thinking hard, he attempts to articulate, “I was in an accident... a car accident.” He coughs. Once, then twice. He sits, pushing against his stomach with each breath, “I could’ve sworn I-” He clears his throat, “Well, I must’ve made it here on pure adrenaline. I don’t remember, but thank you for waiting...” He swallows, “for me.”

Slamming the resume down, the man in his suit slides the paper into a manilla folder. The man hunches forward. Under his heavy hands sits a file with several documents tucked inside. Derrick’s eyes

tremble away from direct eye contact; a tickling in his throat will not subside. The man pushes forward a glass of water, sliding the glass close to the edge for Derrick to grab.



“Go ahead, and I knew you’d be a little thirsty. After all, you did just die.”

Derrick drops the restraint, and a series of coughs jab out of him.

“The water’s here if you need it.”  
The man pushes on.

Derrick finds a momentary peace between coughs to point at the glass, “It’s half empty.”

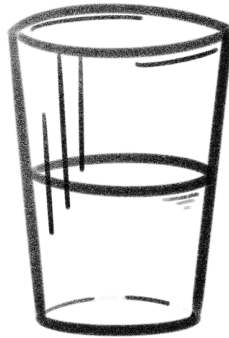
The man opens the manilla folder and begins writing.

“What’re you doing?—  
What is this?!” Derrick motions his elbow close to his face, anticipating another coughing fit.

“We’re gonna have a little int—”

“Interrogation?!”

“Interview.” The man gestures for Derrick to restrain himself. He continues, “We will have an interview about your life, how perfect it was, and what’s to happen next.”



“Last I remember, my car skidded off the road. I could’ve killed somebody.”

“But you didn’t. You swerved not to hit that little raccoon crossing the road.”

Derrick shakes his head in disapproval, pushing past the cough. His voice turns gruff, “No, no, my life was—”

“Perfectly balanced.” The man’s tense stare holds Derrick still. Once he is sure, Derrick has quieted himself, “You were born, lived a bit, and then you died. I call that a perfect life.”

In restraint, Derrick sits back in his seat, “You must have me confused with somebody else.

This couldn’t have been the plan.”

The man scrunches his eyebrows and focuses on the file before him. While he scans the file before him, he reads off: “Derrick J. Unas. Born: 1997. Died: Today.” He crosses his legs as he leans back into his office chair. Tapping his pen lightly on the

file, he chuckles. “You know what your life score was, Derrick? It was perfect.”

Derrick thinks about his Friday nights, “I was alone.”

“You had friends.”

He thinks about his Saturday nights, “I never fell in love.”

“You had a family.”

He thinks about the vacation time he left behind at his old job, “I never went to Japan!”

The man cannot refute that, “Fair... fair.”

Overhead are the fluorescent lights casting their pale light onto the dark olive carpet—this suffocates the room. The blinds are shut tight on the only window in the office; nothing comes in or out. Derrick feels a cough creep up his esophagus.

The man booms, “Other than that, perfectly balanced.” He gestures from one hand to another, “For every good thing,

there was a subsequential bad thing.” Cheekily, he shrugs his shoulders, “Light and dark. The Yang and the Yin.”

“Yin and Yang?”

“Potato and *potato*.” The man swivels in his chair with a clever grin, patting himself on the back. He sits with delight, thinking about the craftsmanship of it all.

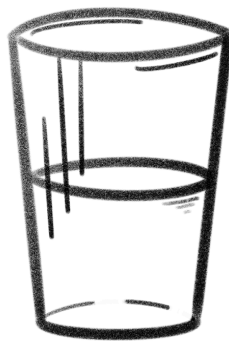
While the man spaces out, Derrick looks back. Behind him, he imagines what could be on the other side of the door that exits the office. Purgatory? Hell? Maybe nothing at all. His heavy exhales hurry a heaving cough that cackles out of him.

“Derrick, what’s behind that door isn’t meant for you. Not yet, anyway.”

“Smoke? Hellfire? Brimstone?”

The man jokes, “No, you’ve had your fill of those things.”

Derrick clears his throat once more.



“Have some water, son. You ought to be thirsty.”

“Because I was trapped underneath smoke? If I’m not mistaken, my last memory was of me sucking down the burning exhaust from a 2002 Chevy Prizm piled on top of me. What gave you the idea that *I* might be thirsty?!”

“Drink your water.”

“Will that make me *balanced*?!”  
Derrick rises from his seat slowly, “Suffocated in life. Drowned in death.” He throws his hands up, “Balance? What a load of crock.”

“Your water.”

Derrick leans on the desk poking his finger into the man’s black tie, “What makes you think that that’s a way to live?” He grits his teeth, “That every moment of bliss is squandered by what?!”

“You’re parched.”

“By balance? Balanced what? Balanced misery? Because it’s necessary?!”

Derrick holds his head while pacing around the room. He turns his attention back to the man, “Why is it necessary that I be equally unhappy?”

“Drink it.”

“WHY WOULD I WANT YOUR  
HALF EMPTY GLASS OF  
WATER?!”

“All that shouting is going to make you thirsty!”

“I am thirsty!” Swiftly

grabbing the glass, Derrick chugs the water until nothing is left. His throat clears. He plops back down in his seat across from the man.

“You’d feel much better if I refilled that glass, right?”

Derrick chimes in, “Yeah,” He tries again, “...yeah.” Once he



breaks his stare from the man, Derrick sees the water. He double-takes, noticing that the glass has been refilled halfway.

The man shuts the manilla envelope. Reluctantly, he finds the words, “Look, this isn’t gonna work this time. I will send you back to Earth and have you try this again. I’ll leave a half glass of water here for when you return... Okay, buddy?”

“Half?”

“Not too much, not too little.” The man leans forward slightly with his elbow on his armrest. He smiles tenderly at the young man. “Maybe this time, you’ll go to Japan.”

“If not?”

The man swirls his finger clockwise, “Around we go. Again and again.”

“Okay.”

